

GERMAN STUDENTS SEEK "PEACE WITH THE JEWS"

Behind the Fight Against Nazi Movie-Makers

HILDE WALTER

A SECOND flare-up of what has become known as the "Harlan Case" occurred in Germany this past January, when Veit Harlan's second postwar film, *Hanna Ammon*, had its first showings. Like his earlier film, *Immortal Beloved*, around which centered last year's efforts to keep Harlan out of public life (see COMMENTARY, March 1951), *Hanna Ammon* is completely unpolitical in content. But the name alone of Goebbels' former star director, maker of the infamous *Jew Sues*, aroused opposition, and on January 16, 1952, three hundred students of the University of Freiburg, in Baden in the south of Germany, demonstrated in protest at the showing of the movie in their city. The result was a bloody clash with the police in which a number of students suffered serious injuries. Nine days later, on January 25, much the same thing happened when *Hanna Ammon* was first shown in the North German university city of Goettingen, where policemen in plainclothes were joined by civilians in their attack on the demonstrating students.

EVEN before Hitler, the conspicuous political activity of university students in Germany was nationalist and reactionary. Some signs that this situation has changed since 1945 is shown by the stubbornness with which a sizable party of the German student body today resists the return to public life of souvenirs of the Nazi past like Veit Harlan, Goebbels' one-time filmmaker. HILDE WALTER reports here the events that took place in this connection in several important German university towns at the beginning of this year. Miss Walter was born in Berlin and educated at the Berlin School of Social Work. For a time she was associate editor of the famous magazine *Weltbühne*, but left Germany in 1933 and is now an American citizen, and a free-lance writer in New York, contributing to many periodicals both in this country and abroad.

Student life at most German universities was thereupon galvanized into new political activity as discussion of the Harlan case brought into question the whole attitude of the younger generation of German intellectuals towards their country's Nazi past, towards anti-Semitism and the whole problem of guilt and atonement. The Harlan case has become a watershed line at which the minds of Germans divide, offering a kind of premonition of how various individuals and groups might react towards a future revival of Nazism.

VEIT HARLAN resumed his film activity only after winning an acquittal in a long struggle with the denazification authorities. His first postwar movie appeared on German screens in 1950, and the first protest—a protest since then supported by thousands of other Germans—came immediately from Dr. Erich Lueth, press chief of the Hamburg municipality, who declared that the denazification tribunals had acquitted Harlan on purely formal legal grounds, while condemning him morally. "All decent Germans," Dr. Lueth proclaimed, "mindful of the tears that still flow at millions of Jewish graves," should protest against the distribution of Harlan films and boycott them. Dr. Lueth was thereupon sued by Harlan, the film company, and its distributor, and the courts decided against Lueth, forbidding him to call publicly for a boycott.

But this decision could not prevent a real anti-Harlan movement from getting under way. Those who led it could still, in spite of the courts, invoke "freedom of press and of opinion." (This seeming paradox has led to lively discussion in present-day Germany, where people often feel unsure of themselves in regard to both the definition and the prac-

tice of their new freedoms.) The heavy costs of Erich Lueth's defense, and of his successive defeats in a long series of appeals, were for the most part met by small individual contributions from all circles of German society, with many prominent figures and countless organizations lending their support. (The constitutional aspect of the question is still to be decided by the new Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe, established in September 1951, with which Dr. Lueth has filed a complaint.) All through 1951 protest groups and public figures in many German cities tried to prevent the exhibition of *Immortal Beloved*, and in fact did succeed in having it banned in Munich and some other cities; protests also kept the film from being shown in Switzerland.

IN LATE 1951 and early 1952, Harlan went on a speaking tour in order to "enlighten" the public about himself. In both Erlangen and Marburg he told audiences of young people who had been only children or adolescents when he made *Jew Suess*, that he had been forced under threat of death to direct it. But he was quickly reminded that the Terra film company's producer, when assigned this favorite project of Propaganda Minister Goebbels, had deliberately entrusted the scenario to such incompetent writers that Goebbels had been repeatedly dissatisfied with the results, and the production of the movie constantly postponed. When Harlan, not in the least unwillingly, had taken on the assignment, he made the condition that his name be given top billing, not only as director but also as author of the script, and he demanded that a role be created for his wife, Christina Soederbaum (this was responsible for one of *Jew Suess*'s most inflammatory scenes, the rape of a blonde girl by the Jewish villain).

Yet Harlan declared to the students of Erlangen that his enemies did not bother him so much as some of his self-proclaimed friends who were anti-Semites and thought they had found a fellow believer in him: "I repudiate them and declare that I find them repulsive, uncultured, and stupid." If this

repudiation was sincere—which is quite possible, even probable—it unfortunately came much too late. For in the meantime Harlan had become, willy-nilly, a symbol behind which all anti-Semites and unreconstructed Nazis were rallying in Germany.

ALL this was known to the university students of Freiburg when Harlan's second movie, *Hanna Ammon*, was announced as a forthcoming attraction by a Freiburg cinema in January 1952. A body of these students placed the issue before the student parliament. At the same time they printed leaflets and got permission from the rector of the university to distribute them. According to municipal law, such leaflets could be circulated on "academic soil"—that is, within the university buildings—without bearing the names of their publishers or printers, as was required elsewhere in Freiburg. But when the students began handing out their leaflets on the outside steps of the main university building the police immediately stopped them, declaring that the place was on a "public street" where leaflets without a statement of their origin were subject to confiscation, and their distributors to arrest.

The anti-Harlanists could not obtain a majority in the student parliament for their proposed protest demonstration against *Hanna Ammon*, but they gathered signatures for a petition and sent a delegation to the South Baden Minister of the Interior to ask him, once again, to prohibit the showing of a Harlan movie. A few students together with some young trade-unionists, no more than twenty or thirty persons in all, tried on their own initiative to break up the premiere of the movie, on January 12, at which Harlan made a personal appearance. They whistled during the performance, whispered loudly, shouted "Pfui Harlan!" and dropped small stink-bombs of a harmless kind they had bought in novelty stores. Some of the audience reacted with indignation and anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic remarks. As reported almost unanimously in the newspapers, such cries were heard as "You priest's brood!" "You Jewish hirelings!" "Down with

the Jews, *heil* Hitler!" And: "I haven't seen anybody yet in a gas oven!" The police commissioner, who arrived during the tumult, had the ridiculous idea of having the audience vote on whether the performance should be continued; the majority said yes.

Up till then the anti-Harlan students, still hoping to win over the majority of the student parliament and to march in the name of the entire student body, had postponed notifying the local police in writing, as required by law, of their plans for a public demonstration. But the Minister of the Interior had assured them verbally that the police would protect them when they did demonstrate, and would behave more "tactfully" than on the steps of the university building.

So on January 16, having given up the hope of support from the student body as a whole, between two hundred fifty and three hundred students marched from the university to the movie house where *Hanna Ammon* was being shown. They carried three or four large placards, one of which read: "People who make anti-Jewish movies cannot make any more movies in Germany!" Six hundred onlookers had gathered to watch them on their way. Among these were many youths whose appearance was not very reassuring; some eyewitnesses described them as "a mob."

Some members of this "mob" tore a poster out of the hands of the students at the head of the column and threw it to the ground. The police did not move. But the students remained calm, picked the poster up, and continued their march. At this point a policeman in uniform rushed up to them, his club raised, and screamed "*Plakat runter!*" When the student holding the poster failed to lower it, the policeman struck him on the wrist several times until he let it fall. A moment later a group of plainclothesmen fell on the other students with rubber clubs and beat them until uniformed policemen "came to the assistance" of the attackers and arrested every student who had tried to defend himself. Three were taken to the hospital with serious concussions, and a girl student suf-

fered a hemorrhage of the spine in addition to a concussion. Other injured students were able to go to their homes, where they told investigators of the brutality with which the police had behaved. Meanwhile the arrested students were being beaten bloody in the police station (though no charges were ever placed against them).

Onlookers who had urged the police on with anti-Semitic cries, and the policemen themselves, spread the rumor later that the students had been the attackers and that several people had been hurt by them. But no non-student was found who showed the slightest trace of an injury.

THE first official reaction was the prohibition by the Prime Minister of South Baden of any further showing of *Hanna Ammon*. The city council expressed its indignation at the behavior of the police, the Freiburg newspapers ran detailed and objective stories of the event, and the university rector sided with his students. Editorially, the leading papers supported the demonstrators, and U.S. High Commissioner McCloy, visiting Freiburg on January 21, told the university body that if he were a student he too would have demonstrated against Harlan. The majority of Freiburg's citizens, however, insisted on their right to see the movie undisturbed. The ban on the film was lifted June 13, and on June 17 the Freiburg students held a protest meeting at which a member of the faculty declared that "it is more important for the German people to make peace with Israel than to make peace with Veit Harlan." Later, about a thousand students demonstrated peacefully before the two theaters showing the film, and the police on this occasion seem to have confined themselves to maintaining order. One student went on a hunger strike, and, in further protest, the students called off a meeting at which funds were to be collected for "peace with Israel," feeling that such a meeting could have no meaning so long as Harlan's film was being shown.

In Goettingen, in the north, the student body is predominantly Lutheran, unlike

Freiburg's, which is divided about equally between Catholics and Protestants, and Goettingen is regarded, whether rightly or wrongly, as a sort of haven for pro-Nazi students. On the other hand, there also exist well-organized democratic student groups, who had demonstrated in 1951 against the revival of dueling fraternities at their university. Hence some political tension was already present.

On January 25, nine days after the original fracas at Freiburg, a number of Goettingen students demonstrated publicly against the forthcoming showing of *Hanna Ammon* in their city. They, too, carried placards and posters, and shouted in unison against the return to the public scene of a former accomplice of the Nazis; they also called for the final liquidation of Nazi anti-Semitism, for "peace with Israel." This time civilians as well as policemen attacked the demonstrators; there is almost no doubt that organized bands of hoodlums were involved.

Four days later, on January 29, the rector and forty-eight professors of the University of Goettingen announced their support of the demonstrators, and rebuked those newspapers that had run distorted accounts of the incident. They proclaimed further: "Without endorsing the form of the demonstration in all particulars, we recognize it as a sign of the existence among academic youth of a sense of political responsibility that moves them to enter the lists vigorously against anti-Semitic and undemocratic tendencies."

In Muenster too, with its predominantly Catholic university, the students organized a protest against the Harlan movie. There, neither the police nor the citizenry, nor even other students, opposed the demonstration, and the movie was quickly withdrawn. (Truly, the Kingdom of God still reigns in Muenster, as it did in the 16th century under heretics!)

ACCORDING to all reliable reports, the majority of the pro-Harlan public consisted neither of concealed former Nazis nor of neo-Nazis. Even the extent of anti-Semitism was much debated by the students.

Clara Menck, writing in the March 1952 issue of the Berlin magazine *Der Monat*, reported that her investigations in Freiburg seemed to indicate that while anti-Semitism did exist in many cases and emerged as a secondary element in many more, the main impulse behind the hostility was a fear of "legal insecurity." For very understandable if not laudable reasons, most Germans wish to break with the past by simply forgetting it; when any public figure such as Veit Harlan is attacked for his past, many others begin to fear that the whole question of Nazi affiliations might be reopened for everyone, and in defending Harlan they defend themselves. As one citizen, a dentist, put it: "Now they've denazified me, they're starting the show all over again with Harlan. What's there left to depend on?" This attitude, Miss Menck reports, was expressed in all sorts of ways, from the appeal to "legally established rights" to mere vague abuse.

In addition, many Freiburgers felt anger at what they regarded as "guardianship" exerted over them by an academic group. A manual worker described the students as "lousy kids," and a twenty-two-year-old beautician said, "They're not much older than I am, and what do I know about all this?" (Certain structural changes in German society found expression here. In Freiburg, as in other university cities, the university man has long since lost his old glamor.) Most generally, of course, there was a simple anger at being deprived of a pleasure. "It's a first-rate German movie, you can cry at it so nicely." Or: "We work hard and we want a chance to see movies we like." A young worker said, "Why don't you protest first against Wild West movies?" A Catholic youth said that it would be better to take action against "immoral films."

ADDED to the latent anti-Semitism and the fear of the past that came to the surface in all the excitement, was the rage of unpolitical people at "the politicians." As if "the police force" were an abstract, unsailable institution of guaranteed integrity, the fear was often voiced that the police

might become "a football of the politicians."

A very general need was felt to brand the students as "agitators" and, by condemning their demonstration, to protect the hard-won peace and order of the "average citizen." In a public discussion of the disturbances arranged by the Freiburg Association for Civil Rights, a spokesman for these embittered citizens asked: "If [the students] always keep on talking about good and evil, what will be left of the law?" Even those on his own side laughed at this.

In the course of these discussions, the guilty policemen and the owner of the movie house, whose financial interests had been damaged by the prohibition of *Hanna Ammon*, cleverly exploited this unpolitical desire for peace and order to defend their own actions. They even insinuated that the motives of the student "agitators" were questionable. The rumor suddenly spread all over the city that the students had been "bought and paid for." Hundreds of people asserted that each student demonstrator had received 12.50 marks and a supper, promised them in advance.

As to the question of who would have handed out three hundred times 12.50 marks, together with as many suppers, there were various answers, some of them contradictory. "Higher quarters" were mentioned, or even "the Church," "the Archbishop," "the government." Surprisingly, very few said that "the Jews" had paid for the demonstration.

Defenders of Harlan included a few admirers of his two postwar films; most critical opinion, however, considered both films aesthetically worthless mixtures of brutality and emotionalism. Only once during his "lecture" tour was Harlan, usually a skillful defender of himself, at a loss for an answer; that was when a girl student at Marburg, after listening to his dramatic speech of self-justification, very calmly asked: "Then why do you make such trash today?"

It seems unlikely that political motives—or Nazi sentiments—played a major role in the brutality of the Freiburg police. The Nazis had been weeded out of the local police forces in Western Germany more carefully

by the Allies, as a rule, than out of many other organizations. (It did turn out that one of the two or three officers in charge of the plainclothesmen had been a Nazi who falsified his records in order to get his job.)

What really provoked the reaction of the police seems to have been the widespread German assumption that citizens—in this case the students—ought to "behave" and not start trouble, no matter what the occasion. As representatives of the legal government, the policemen felt entitled to go all out in putting down public commotions of any sort, political or otherwise; the police have often acted with similar brutality against students demonstrating for entirely unpolitical reasons.

The concept of the rights and responsibilities of the citizen that Miss Menck found among so many Freiburgers was a very limited one, hence the readiness of the local police to react with brutality against any public manifestation of opinion by individuals acting on their own initiative as the citizens of a democracy are assumed to have the right to do.

WHAT about the students themselves? What led them to their action against Harlan? Who were they? Miss Menck reported on this, too, in *Der Monat*.

Especially interesting is the fact that even the most active among the demonstrating Freiburg students represented no political or philosophical "unity." Their origins, their upbringing, and even their motives for political action, varied greatly. Only one common past experience characterized a relatively large number among them; this was experience of life in the Eastern Zone of Germany or in other countries behind the Iron Curtain.

Among the 4,200 students of the University of Freiburg there were only one hundred and twenty refugees and expellees from the East. These, though of varied political and social backgrounds, were more strongly represented in the demonstration than the native West German students, showing themselves just as opposed to Nazi

tendencies as they were to the Soviet regime that had driven them from their homes.

ONLY about a third of the principal actors in the demonstration had grown up in anti-Nazi homes. One of these was the girl student who suffered concussion and hemorrhage of the spine; she declared that she hated demonstrations and parades and took part in them only through a sense of duty. The Nazis had imprisoned her father for his part in a Catholic war prisoners' relief organization; she herself had refused to do service in the Nazi organization for girls. She despised people who "made too much" of their sufferings under the Nazis, and said that one had to "watch out for the impenitent Nazis."

The only demonstrator of Jewish origin was a twenty-three-year-old philologist who taught at the Institute of Semitic Studies. He had escaped from the Third Reich to Palestine, had there become converted to Catholicism, and then returned to Germany. He said the State of Israel was too nationalistic, and he was more critical of neo-Nazi tendencies in Germany than were the other students.

A twenty-six-year-old Catholic student of theology was much occupied with the problem of how Christian forgiveness was to be reconciled with political unforgetfulness. Under the Third Reich he had been active in the underground Catholic youth organization of Baden, and then had spent a year in the trenches and three years as a prisoner of war. He had been particularly active in organizing the demonstration against Harlan.

A twenty-three-year-old refugee from the East earned his tuition as a factory worker. Originally a musician, he had begun to study economics because of his interest in politics. His family had met such a dreadful fate under Hitler that he refused to speak about it. While in bed with the concussion he had received from a police club, he analyzed his own motives and set them down in writing: "What has this man [Harlan] really done to you?" you ask and thereby assign everything we have lived through to the past, to ob-

livion. I, too, do this, for sometime there must be an end to the eternal desire to settle accounts. . . . I, too, would have wished that this man might have covered himself with the cloak of the past. But this he did not do. And therefore . . . he will do in the future what he has done in the past, even if he does not do it in the present. I inquire after the character of this man, after the appearance of a reality that I can respect; for the character of our fellow men, their faith, is the security for our future life together. . . . But I inquire in vain, and that is the reason for my actions. . . . Every democracy is a form of chivalry. We young people must stand on guard lest this chivalry, which is the sum of all the practical and theoretical restraints we set upon ourselves, be abused."

Another student, the son of a wholly unpolitical family of officials who had suffered nothing under Hitler, said that the anti-Harlan action was a necessary protest against forgetfulness. He himself could still remember the pogroms against the Jews. And he added: "One must see to it that people take an interest in the problems of the state."

A gentle, nervous student wounded in the war—a student of psychology in his second semester—had gone along with the demonstrators in spite of his physical handicap and been beaten by the police, although he had pointed to his war injury. He was interested in the problem of the influence of films on the public, and had earlier worked to bar young people from seeing bad gangster films. He said: "Anything is possible with a man who turns out *Jew Suess* and then makes films at which people can 'cry so nicely.'"

A Sudeten German from Prague, twenty-seven years old, studying history, philosophy, and the history of art, readily admitted that in 1939 he had welcomed Hitler's march into Prague as an "intoxicating release," and had regarded the concentration camps as merely a sort of "intensified imprisonment." But as a German soldier he had seen the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto. He could not forget it, and felt that the lot of his own family, when it was driven out of Czecho-

slovakia, had been a kind of compensatory justice. "One was able for the first time to conceive of what such a thing was like," he said. And on Harlan: "On the basis of my own experience, I cannot reproach him for having made *Jew Suess*; but he should keep to himself now and remember how difficult it is for Germany to win respect again."

A twenty-four-year-old student of theology—apparently Protestant—expressed an "intractable hate against everything National Socialist"; he was led to take part in the demonstration against Harlan primarily by "regard for the feelings of the Jews and of other countries."

Among the demonstrators, along with confirmed anti-Nazis, there were a large number of young people who had been indifferent or neutral under Hitler, and even some former Nazis. But in all cases there was a vivid consciousness of the Nazi past, and a burning sense of the need to face the past and actively make up for it. Almost none of the demonstrators was younger than twenty-two or older than twenty-eight. This generation had experienced the Third Reich and the war with full awareness, but had not been as long in the army as the older age-groups, many of whom were now too busy catching up with their professional and private lives to participate in public matters.

The reactions of the indignant moviegoers of Freiburg have only reinforced the determination of these students not to remain passive in political questions. They want especially to influence the younger people, the eighteen- to twenty-year-olds, who knew little or nothing of the Third Reich and have taken little interest in it.

THE Freiburg students who fought against the "will to forget" are a minority in their university, but they do not stand alone in the academic life of Germany. It may be too soon to draw definite conclusions, but it would appear that a good section of Germany's new intellectual class have resolved not to repeat the mistakes of their elders. In the last days of the Weimar Republic too many intellectuals, even when not seduced by Hitler, remained paralyzed, while the anti-Nazis among them surrendered too much of their personal initiative to political parties. These younger intellectuals, who gave us a sample of their mettle in the anti-Harlan demonstrations, have a new concept of citizenship and of their responsibility as intellectuals. They are ready to act on their own to defend the democratic order, and—perhaps even more important in the context of recent German history—to accept the consequences of their acts.